

Sermon for Morning Prayer Trinity XIV

Lessons:

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the seventh Chapter of Jeremiah:¹

“The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying, Stand in the gate of the Lord’s house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the Lord, all ye of Judah, that enter in at these gates to worship the Lord. Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Amend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place. Trust ye not in lying words, saying, The Temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, The temple of the Lord, are these. For if ye thoroughly amend your ways and your doings; if ye thoroughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbor; If ye oppress not the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and shed not innocent blood in this place, neither walk after other gods to your hurt: Then will I cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers, for ever and ever.

“Behold, ye trust in lying words, that cannot profit. Will ye steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and burn incense unto Baal [BUH-awl], and walk after other gods whom ye know not; And come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, We are delivered to do all these abominations? Is this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, even I have seen it, saith the Lord.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the eighteenth Verse of the thirteenth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke:

“Then said he, Unto what is the kingdom of God like? And whereunto shall I resemble it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and cast into his garden; and it grew, and waxed a great tree; and the fowls of the air lodged in the branches of it. And again he said, Whereunto shall I like the Kingdom of God? It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened. And he went through the cities and villages, teaching, and journeying toward Jerusalem. Then said one unto him, Lord, are there few that be saved? And he said unto them,

“Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able. When once the master of the house is risen up, and

hath shut to the door, and ye begin to stand without, and to knock at the door, saying, Lord, Lord, open unto us; and he shall answer and say unto you, I know not whence ye are: Then shall ye begin to say, We have eaten and drunk in thy presence, and thou hast taught in our streets. But he shall say, I tell you, I know not whence ye are; depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrust out. And they shall come from the east, and from the west, and from the north, and from the south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God. And, behold, there are last which shall be first, and there are first which shall be last.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “... Behold, ye trust in lying words, that cannot profit. Will ye steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and burn incense unto Baal [**BUH-ahl**], and walk after other gods whom ye know not; And come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, We are delivered to do all these abominations?”ⁱⁱ In the Name of the Father, and of the ✕ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

Jeremiah’s exhortation was written approximately 610 B.C., not long after King Josiah [**JOE’S-eye-uh**] was killed in battle at Meggido.ⁱⁱⁱ Josiah’s death ended the Israelites’ [**IZ-reel-ites**] brief return to the Law and to the Mosaic Covenant. Thanks to their once again falling away from righteousness, it would not be long before the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar [**NEB-oo-kad-nezzers**] would invade the southern kingdom, Israel [**IZ-rye-el**], capture Jerusalem,^{iv} and carry off the people of Judah [**JOO-duh**] as captives to Babylon.^v

As Jeremiah wrote, the Egyptian puppet Jehoiakim [**Jeh-HOY-yah-kim**] sat on the throne of the northern kingdom, Judah^{vi} and, Jeremiah suggests, God must have ceased to reside in the Temple sanctuary in disgust over the people’s apostasy.^{vii} Thus he called that Temple, in which the ancient rituals were carried on even though the Covenant was no longer observed there, a den of robbers. The Temple hierarchs and the lords of the land had stolen Israel away from the worship of the True God.

We meet Jeremiah's metaphor again, later in the history of salvation, when Our Lord adopted it and applied it to the money changers and animal vendors whom He scourged out of the Temple.^{viii}

Theme:

False prophets are thus nothing new in the history of God's people. The ancient Israelites and Judeans suffered from them; today, we, too, continue to suffer from them. Now, as in ancient times, their seductive voices call us to ignore the commands God has given us, to cease walking in His narrow and often stony path, and, instead, to follow the wide, paved, comfortable way of our own desires and inclinations.

Development:

Those who today seek to lead Christians astray use many of the same lures as did those who wooed the Jews of Jeremiah's time to abandon the strict ways of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

There are three common ways to accomplish that misdirection. One is to convince people that God really is not demanding very much of them. This is often not difficult to do because many people are just waiting for an excuse to take the path of least resistance, to follow an easier set of guidelines for life.

A second tactic is to reinterpret for them what God has always told them to do, telling them that what the new "teacher" wants them to do is also what God wants them to do, or, at the very least, is something God is willing to permit them to do.

And, finally, to make sure people do not see through the screen of laziness and self-indulgence to realize that they are being lied to, it is common to undermine their understanding of and commitment to the basic formularies of the Faith.

All three of these techniques are very effective in turning God's people from God to Mammon.

1. We are frequently told, and often by those who are presented as “leaders” and “experts”, that we do not need to adhere to the strict, traditional moral code.

It is neither easy nor pleasant to live as we ought to do, to behave the way God commands us to do. We are always better off if we do but it is more comfortable not to. Thus we are always looking for ways to lighten the burden, to ease the struggle, of living uprightly and morally.

Minimalism is our natural and preferred moral principle: Do no more than you need to in order to get by and still be able to think of oneself, and be thought of by one’s neighbors, as “a good person”. Our own good opinions of ourselves and our fellows’ good opinions of us are not only easier to win than is God’s approval but cost us a great deal less effort, and very little self-sacrifice, as well. So we seek not to ask what God wants us to do, we seek instead to know how little we can do and still escape punishment by Him.

God always demands more of us than society ever will. So it is always tempting to succumb to the lesser demands of the Spirit of the Age and to disregard the more onerous demands of the Holy Spirit. “No one will every notice” is one common argument for pleasing ourselves and our cohorts; “No one cares about that old stuff anymore” is another. Any one of us can easily recall a whole list of similar rationalizations.

2. We are often told, and again by those who are presented to us as “leaders” and “experts”, that God has subtly changed His focus and now wants us to concentrate on different things than He told our grandparents to attend to.

A second tactic is to reinterpret for them what God has always told them to do, telling them that what the new “teacher” wants them to do is also what God wants them to do, or, at the very least, is something God is willing to permit them to do.

Thus in 1979 the Episcopal Church changed the promises made by or on behalf of a person being baptized. No longer does an ECUSAn baptizand forswear the world, the flesh, and the devil, and to put on Christ; now he or she promises to promote an undefined concept of “justice” in the world. As the focus of the rite has

shifted away from our duties toward God and onto our duties toward our fellow men, the divine nature of the Christian calling has been subtly de-emphasized.

Of course, people who are focused on bringing more and better foreign aid to the needy abroad are at the same time not focused on their own imperfections. When they are so conscious of the great good works they are doing to fix the world outside, they are distracted from doing the works that are necessary to repair the sinful heart inside. It is always easier to deliver food and agricultural machinery than it is to confront our own sinfulness, so few resist this new orientation.

3. We are often told, by these same “leaders” and “experts”, that the traditional formularies of the Faith are no longer reliable guides for the conduct of our daily lives.

And, finally, to make sure people do not see through the screen of laziness and self-indulgence to realize that they are being lied to, it is common to undermine their understanding of and commitment to the basic formularies of the Faith.

Here, one of the prime techniques is to convince people that, with the advance of science and technology, they know more than our ancestors knew and so we must be closer to God’s goals for us than our ancestors were. Those old Hebrews knew little of astronomy and nothing of geology, atomic physics or the germ theory of disease, so how could they have known what the human soul really needs in order to be saved?

The fallacy here is to assume that just because we know more about the mechanics of the physical world than they did, so do we also know more about the human spirit than they did. In many ways, in fact, we know less, insulated as we are from the daily realities of life in a culture where famine, disease and hostile animals constantly threatened physical survival. How many of today’s false prophets risk being eaten by lions as those of ancient Israel did?

As we learn more and more about technology and science, so we forget more and more about the languages, history, and cultures of the past. Thus it is now easy to tell people that the Old Testament account of the fall of Sodom and Gomorrah was not really about sexual impropriety but, instead, was about the sin of inhospitality. Never mind that for three thousand years all Jews and Christians have known precisely what was wrong in the Cities of the Plain and why they

incurred the Wrath of God; “scholars” and “academics” tell us that all those generations were wrong and it was all nothing much to be concerned about.

Thus are people led away from relying on Scripture and taught to rely instead on transient scribblers.

Conclusion:

Today, we are just as beset with lying words that cannot profit as were the people of Jeremiah’s day. We must always and everywhere be constantly vigilant to test all proposals we hear and read according to the great three-pronged Anglican test for truth:

- Is the suggested belief or course of action found in Scripture? Or, if it is not so found, is it at least consistent with what we find in Scripture?
- Is the proposal found in what the Church has always done or taught? Or, if it is not so found, is it at least consistent with what the Church has always done or taught?
- Is the new idea or suggestion something that men and women of ordinary intelligency, using the normal mental faculties God gave them, find reasonable and proper?

We call this “the test of Scripture, Tradition, and Reason”. God gave us each of the standards by which it judges: He inspired the record of His Revelation that we find in Scripture; He guided and maintained both the Old Testament and New Testament Churches, the history of which make up our Tradition; and He gave us the faculty of Reason which is the part of our natures that is “in the image of God”.

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August 24, 2008.

ⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxiii (PECUSA 1928/1943). “Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service....” Concerning the Service of the Church, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER supra at viii.*

ⁱⁱ *Jeremiah 7: 8-10 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *608 B.C.*

^{iv} *First in 597 B.C. and then again in 587 B.C.*

^v *Also first in 597 B.C. and then repeated in 587 B.C.*

^{vi} *609-598 B.C.*

^{vii} *Jer. 22: 13-19.*

^{viii} *St. Matt. 21: 12-13; St. Mark 11: 15-17; St. Luke 19: 45-46.*

^{ix} *Sometime Priest in Charge, St. James' Anglican Catholic Church, Erie PA.*